

Increased Learning Time Under Stimulus-Funded School Improvement Grants: High Hopes, Varied Implementation

Key Findings

Research has long suggested that significantly increasing quality time in school for teaching and learning can have a positive impact on student achievement. Recognizing this connection, federal guidance requires low-performing schools to increase student learning time if they are implementing two popular reform models using school improvement grant (SIG) funds appropriated by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA).

This special report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) highlights findings about this increased learning time requirement from two recent CEP studies of SIG implementation in school year 2010-11 and the fall and winter of 2011-12. The first study was based on a CEP survey of state education officials in 46 responding states, including the District of Columbia. The second consisted of in-depth case studies of state and local SIG implementation in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho.

Key findings include the following:

- ***All 46 states responding to CEP's survey reported that at least some of their SIG-funded schools are implementing one of two federal school improvement models that require increased learning time.*** These include the transformation model, which involves replacing the principal and undertaking other specific reforms; and the turnaround model, which involves replacing the principal and half or more of the school's staff. Forty-five survey states have schools using the transformation model, and 29 states have schools using the turnaround model.

- ***Officials in a majority of the states surveyed said the strategy of increasing learning time is, to a great extent or some extent, a key element in improving achievement in SIG-funded schools.*** Some state officials indicated that the importance of this strategy varied from school to school. A few said it was too early to tell whether increased learning time is making a difference.
- ***All three case study states have ensured that schools using the transformation or turnaround models are increasing learning time, but the degree of state focus on this strategy varies.*** State officials in Maryland reported no major problems with schools' implementation of the increased learning time requirement but believed it was too early to judge its impact. Michigan state officials said that although the state has encouraged SIG schools to increase core instructional time for all students, some schools are struggling to fully implement the strategy; the state intends to work on improving the quality of increased learning time in the future. In Idaho, state officials ensured that all SIG applications included plans to add instructional time for students, but a state official noted that increased learning time has not yet been a major focus of state supports.
- ***All SIG-funded case study schools that are using the transformation or turnaround models have increased students' learning time, as have some non-funded schools, but implementation and emphasis varied.*** In Maryland, all case study schools increased learning time but targeted this extra time on students with the greatest needs. Most participants in the Maryland case studies viewed increased learning time as essential to raising achievement. In Michigan, three of the four case study schools increased learning time, primarily by extending the school day for all students, as the state has encouraged SIG grantees to do. Officials in these three Michigan schools, however, did not always consider increased learning time an easy fix or a key part of their reform agenda. In Idaho, both of the two SIG-funded case study schools increased learning time, primarily by offering more instructional opportunities to low-achieving students. The one Idaho case study school that

applied for but did not receive SIG funding was not able to make all of the scheduling changes the staff wanted, but it did add extra instruction for the neediest students.

Background on SIGs and the CEP Studies

The passage of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, also known as the economic stimulus package, provided an extra \$3 billion for school improvement grants authorized by section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, on top of the \$500 million previously appropriated for SIGs for fiscal year 2009. (Title I is the large federal program that provides assistance to low-income schools to improve achievement for students who struggle academically.) These SIG funds are targeted on improving academic performance in the “persistently lowest-achieving” schools within each state, typically the lowest 5%.

Under the U.S. Department of Education’s guidance for the use of SIGs and other section 1003(g) funds, schools that receive these grants must implement one of four school improvement models, explained in more detail in **box A**.

Box A. School improvement models

Federal guidance requires schools receiving SIG funds to use one of the following school improvement models:

- **Transformation:** Implement all of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.
- **Turnaround:** Replace the principal and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility to implement fully a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes; rehire no more than 50% of the school staff; and implement strategies that provide increased learning time, among other requirements.
- **Restart:** Convert a school into one operated by a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.
- **School closure:** Close a school and enroll its students in other schools in the district that are higher-achieving.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2012

According to numerous studies, well-designed programs that significantly increase learning time for students can have a positive impact on student achievement (see, for example, Frazier & Morrison, 1998; Farbman, n. d.). Recognizing the relationship between instructional time and learning, the U.S. Department of Education guidance for section 1003(g) SIGs requires schools that select the transformation and turnaround improvement models to increase learning time by extending the school day, week, or year. The guidance defines increased learning time as follows:

... increasing the length of the school day, week, or year to significantly increase the total number of school hours so as to include additional time for (a) instruction in core academic subjects including English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography; (b) instruction in other subjects and provision of enrichment activities that contribute to a well-rounded education, such as physical education, service learning, and experiential and work-based learning opportunities; and (c) teachers to collaborate, plan, and engage in professional development within and across grades and subjects (U.S. Department of Education , 2012, p. 23).

Researchers at the Center on Education Policy conducted two studies to learn more about states' experiences in using SIG funding and implementing the revised section 1003(g) SIG requirements, including increased learning time.

The first study, described in the 2012 report *State Implementation and Perceptions of Title I School Improvement Grants under the Recovery Act: One Year Later*, draws on findings from a winter 2011-12 survey of state Title I directors; 45 states and the District of Columbia responded. (D.C. is counted as a state in the tallies in this report.) The survey focused on Title I directors' general perceptions of various SIG program requirements, including increased learning time, and on other aspects of SIG implementation (CEP 2012a).

The second study, discussed in the 2012 report *Opportunities and Obstacles: Implementing Stimulus-Funded School Improvement Grants in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho*, uses case study research to examine state, district, and school-level implementation of the SIG program in three geographically diverse states that are taking different approaches to

school improvement. Findings, including those about increased learning time, are based on interviews with 35 state and local officials in the three states and in-depth research on 11 low-achieving schools, including schools that received SIG funds and comparable low-performing schools that did not (CEP, 2012b).

This report pulls out findings about increased learning time from both the survey data and case studies.

Survey Findings about Increased Learning Time

Title I directors who responded to the state survey generally had positive views about the importance of the increased learning time requirement to improving achievement, although officials in some states said its importance varies from school to school.

In all 46 survey states, some schools were implementing SIG models that required increased learning time. As displayed in **table 1**, 45 survey states had one or more schools using the *transformation* model. In 28 of these states, survey respondents indicated that increasing learning time is, to a great extent or some extent, a key element in improving achievement in a majority of schools using the transformation model. In 12 states, respondents said the extent to which this strategy is key varies from school to school.

Table 1. Number of states reporting that increasing learning time is a key element in improving achievement in SIG schools under the transformation and turnaround models

School improvement model	# of survey states with schools using model	Degree to which increasing learning time is key				# of survey states with no schools using model
		To a great extent or some extent	Not at all	Varies from school to school	Too soon to tell	
Transformation	45	28	0	12	5	1
Turnaround	29	22	0	4	3	17

Table reads: Of the 45 survey states in which SIG schools are implementing the transformation model, 28 reported that increasing learning time for students is, to a great extent or some extent, a key element in improving student achievement in a majority of their schools using this model. In one state, no schools were using the transformation model.

Twenty-nine survey states had one or more schools using the *turnaround* model, also shown in table 1. (This group includes the one survey state in which no schools had chosen

the transformation model.) In 22 of these states, survey respondents said that increasing learning time is, to a great extent or some extent, a key element in improving student achievement in the majority of schools using the turnaround model. In 4 states, respondents said the extent to which this strategy is key varies from school to school. For both the transformation and turnaround models, a small share of states said it was too soon to tell about the importance of increasing learning time in raising achievement.

Case Study Findings about Increased Learning Time

CEP's case studies in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho found that most of the SIG-funded schools studied (as well as some non-funded comparison schools) have increased learning time, despite being located in different states and serving different types of communities and students. These schools have done so mainly by adding to the overall length of the day or eliminating non-instructional time or both, although some schools reported doing so only for students with the greatest needs. Perceptions about increased learning time and experiences with implementing this requirement varied across the three states and across the case study schools.

The state officials interviewed in Maryland reported no major administrative issues with the increased learning time requirement; however, they felt the true impact of this requirement on student achievement and school improvement efforts remains to be seen.

Extended learning time has sometimes been difficult to implement in SIG schools in Michigan. Mark Coscarella, the assistant director of the Office of Education Improvement and Innovation at the Michigan Department of Education, noted that Michigan schools have struggled with this requirement. Michigan has interpreted increased learning time primarily as adding core instructional time for all students, rather than just adding tutoring or enrichment for a select group. For example, Coscarella explained, "schools simply wanted to add a lot of kids to the tutoring thing after school or in some cases have a 'zero hour' [before school officially starts] that was optional for kids or a Saturday school that

was optional for students, or [add] just a minimal amount of time, five minutes a day.” The state has discouraged these practices, he said, and instead has encouraged schools to lengthen the school day by adding actual time—for example, by having staff work staggered hours but having students in classes all day and by cutting all transition times between classes to the bare minimum. Extended learning time is an area Michigan will continue to work on in the coming years, Coscarella said.

In Idaho’s review of SIG applications, the state ensured that that the applications included plans to add more minutes to instruction for all students. However, Steve Underwood, the Director of Statewide Support, acknowledged that although increased learning time is a required component of the transformation model, the state has not made this a major priority in the state’s technical assistance or expectations. “[O]ur premise at the state level has been that . . . extended learning time is only good if the extended learning time is good—if it’s done well,” he said.

Maryland case study schools

Both SIG schools and non-recipient schools in Maryland are targeting increased learning opportunities on students with the greatest needs. Increased learning opportunities at SIG-funded schools in the Baltimore City Public Schools focus primarily on students most in need of additional assistance, although they are open to all students who want to take advantage of them. These programs typically occur after school. As Beth Nolan, the former turnaround director with the district, explained, “Every student does not need to stay until 5:00. There might be some students that need to . . . so let’s get the students who really need the additional intervention or enrichment and extended learning to be [at school] until 5:00.”

Gholson Middle School, a SIG school in Prince George’s County Public Schools, has taken a similar approach to extended learning time. In the first year of SIG funding, the school targeted extended learning opportunities on students who had been retained for one or more years “to give them extra support,” said Lacey Robinson, one of two co-principals of

the school. In the second year of funding, the school waited to see what state assessment data revealed. Students who scored at the basic level on the assessment (about one-third of the school's students) or at the proficient level (another one-third) were given an application to attend an extended learning opportunity, or ELO.

ELOs were designed to “help draw kids in [while emphasizing] reading, math, social studies, and science,” explained Robinson. Gholson teachers designed courses like cooking with mathematics, science inquiry, reading book clubs, and technology clubs. An algebra teacher and a consumer science teacher are designing an ELO in which students will “make fabric, they’ll make costume designs, and they’ll talk about area, perimeter, and charting,” she said. There will also be an after-school science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) course in which students will be able to compete with other STEM students across the country. The point, Robinson said, is to “look at the [test] scores and figure out what the school needs [are], and then figure out what classes will [meet] them.”

Robinson said that extended learning opportunities funded by SIG are paying off in her school. Children in the surrounding community “just need something to do—parents are working, or they’re not at home, or there’s no one checking in on them,” she said. ELOs have been an inspirational source of change for several Gholson students because “they know that somebody’s always here [for them],” she added. The ELOs are offered on a six-week rotation, with an assessment at the beginning and end of this period. Some students do well enough on the assessments that they no longer need extended learning, while others are asked to continue with the program.

Michigan case study schools

As noted earlier, some SIG schools in Michigan have had difficulties implementing increased learning time. Still, both of the SIG schools studied in Michigan—Phoenix Elementary-Middle School in Detroit and Arthur Hill High School in Saginaw—eventually extended the school day, as did Saginaw High School, a non-recipient school in the Saginaw district.

Phoenix Elementary-Middle was initially unable to extend learning time in 2010-11 and instead shifted its schedule to devote more instructional time to English language arts and math. The district's director of school improvement, Markita Hall, referred to this strategy as "double dosing"—building blocks of time into the schedule to focus more intensively on these core subjects. The double dosing approach, however, does not fit the state's expectations for extending the day. This year, Phoenix has extended learning time by one full hour every day. Because the SIG funds are completely supporting this increase in time, however, Hall notes that "this will be a loss once SIG funds are gone if Title [I] funding cannot support that."

Arthur Hill High School, in contrast, did not mention any difficulties in increasing learning time. Officials in this school reported extending the school day by 30 minutes (5 minutes per class) and offering extra academic support to students through a Saturday School program and similar strategies. The strategy of increased learning time, however, was not among the three that administrators identified as the most salient elements of their SIG plan. Instead, administrators pointed to three other strategies as the most crucial elements of their plan: hiring qualified support staff (called a "SIG team") to make professional development and support a regular part of the school culture; working with their new external provider, EdWorks; and updating the school's technological resources.

Saginaw High School, which applied for but did not win SIG funding, also increased learning time. After failing to receive funding, administrators said they scaled back and focused their improvement plans but kept extended learning time as a key element. The school added an 80-minute math block and an 80-minute literacy block during the week, broken down into 40 minutes per day, five days a week. One 40-minute block per week is used for "organizational skills"; during this period, students can get assistance from teachers on homework on any subject. Teacher Terri Lieber observed that this extended time is "reinforcing" knowledge for students and adding continuity for students throughout the school day. Teacher Shannon Rammner noted that this increased time has also been helpful for teachers, who now have more of an opportunity to observe what students are doing in

other subjects. This gives staff members a chance to have a dialogue and view firsthand how they can help support colleagues in other content areas.

Idaho case study schools

All three Idaho schools studied—including two SIG recipients and one school that was eligible for but did not participate in the SIG program—planned to rearrange their schedules to not only extend the school day but also provide more instruction for students with academic and/or behavioral problems. The SIG schools had more financial resources to do this, however.

At Lakeside Elementary School in the Plummer-Worley School District, the SIG funds supported “master scheduling.” In contrast to past practice, which allowed more flexible scheduling, the school now has a master schedule with the following features:

- Classes take place at predicable times for students, as well as parents and administrators visiting classrooms.
- Reading occurs earlier in the day for younger students when they are more rested.
- Reading is consistently taught for 90 minutes a day.
- Time is set aside for differentiated instruction in small groups based on students’ skill levels.
- Less time is wasted and the transformation model requirement of extending learning time is met.

In 2011-12, Jefferson Middle School, a SIG-funded school in the Caldwell School District, introduced a “flex time” period to make time for more remediation and enrichment based on assessments. The school made room for this period by cutting down on transition time, a step that also extended learning time. During flex time, students can make up work, get extra tutoring in areas of need, or choose an enrichment activity. All interviewees in the school expected this flex time to improve student achievement in the coming year.

The initial SIG application from Wilder Elementary in the Wilder School District outlined plans for a year-round school to correspond with many of the students' winter celebrations in Mexico, which are longer than the current vacation time, and to reduce the loss of learning time during the three-month summer vacation. Ultimately, Wilder decided not to pursue SIG funding and had not implemented this plan for a year-round schedule at the time of our study. The school did, however, add tutoring time for low-achieving students, which was part of its original SIG plan.

Conclusion

CEP's case study research found that SIG schools using the transformation and turnaround models in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho were indeed increasing learning time as intended. Some of these schools, however, reported doing so only for students with the greatest needs, and the perceptions about and experiences with implementing this requirement varied across the three states and case study schools.

State survey respondents generally had positive views about the importance of the increased learning time requirement to improve student achievement, but some said the importance of this requirement varied from school to school or that it was simply too soon to tell how much of a difference it will make. Similar views emerged from our case studies. CEP plans to continue to collect lessons learned about increased learning time in future reports on school improvement grants.

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